

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 003053

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PREL LE FR

SUBJECT: CHARGE CAUTIONS LEBANESE GENERAL AOUN AGAINST SPLITTING OPPOSITION

REF: A. BASKEY-MAILHOT 5/3/05 EMAIL

1B. BEIRUT 1373

1C. PARIS 2162

Classified By: Charge d'affaires Josiah Rosenblatt for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: In a meeting with former Lebanese armed forces commanding General Michel Aoun in Paris May 4, three days before Aoun's scheduled return to Lebanon May 7, Charge cautioned Aoun on the need to maintain Lebanese opposition unity and to do nothing to delay the conduct of May 29 elections. Aoun took Charge's points on board and asserted that his only ambition in returning to Lebanon after his 15 years in exile in France was to help restore the Lebanese democracy. He nevertheless stated that his efforts to broker a common position with Walid Jumblatt, the Hariri family and the traditional Christian leadership had been ignored. Ascribing to these figures mercenary and self-serving motives in seeking power, Aoun said he could not work with such corrupt members of the opposition because they were not credible in the eyes of the Lebanese people. By contrast, Hizballah enjoys "a certain popularity" and has not been corrupt or exploitative. For these reasons, Aoun said he felt he could work with Hizballah, encouraging them to "hand over their weapons to the army" and become a purely political group. Aoun also stated clearly that he would encourage a delay in the conduct of elections of "perhaps 15 days," in order to give Parliament time to vote a new election law, to replace the 2000 law which Aoun said would polarize Lebanese groups and favor the Syrian loyalists. Charge underscored the importance of conducting elections on schedule, clearly stated U.S. policy on Hizballah, and warned Aoun not to allow himself to be used by those who want Syria to retain a measure of influence in Lebanese affairs. End summary.

12. (C) Charge met with Aoun, at Aoun's request, to lay down a clear message on the need to maintain opposition unity and not to allow his return to Lebanon to be exploited by those who wanted to see Syria retain a measure of influence in Lebanese affairs. Charge emphasized the need to keep elections on schedule for May 29 and not to become embroiled in a divisive debate over the nature of the law that will govern the elections. Aoun asserted that his only reason for returning to Lebanon was to help restore the Lebanese democracy. He added, however, that initial indications for the success of this project were not favorable. Aoun claimed to have proposed to Walid Jumblatt and others in the opposition a common program as early as November 2004, but said his proposals had been ignored. He claimed that he alone among Lebanese oppositionists had been forthright in his support of UNSCR 1559 and that it was only after the assassination of former Prime Minister Hariri that others in the opposition spoke out forcefully in favor of a Syrian withdrawal. These same figures are now trying to block Aoun's return to Lebanon, even lobbying against him with Western governments. Jumblatt, Aoun said with some bitterness, had publicly attacked him.

13. (C) Ascribing to them mercenary and self-serving motives in seeking power, Aoun said that he saw no possibility now of finding common ground with Jumblatt, members of the Hariri family, or the traditional Christian leadership (as represented in the Qornet Shehwan). The Lebanese people are aware of the corruption and opportunism of these members of the opposition, who have no credibility in their eyes, Aoun went on. The Lebanese people want real change, not a continuation of governance by an elite political class seeking only to enrich themselves and enjoy the perquisites of power. Moreover, Lebanon's new leadership will have to deal with the critical state of the economy, and cannot do this by continuing to loot the national treasure. He recalled that his proposal for an audit of state finances had raised a "tempest" of protest among officials who had no desire to see their long years of exploiting the public laid bare.

14. (C) Aoun noted that while considering his return to Lebanon he had met in Paris with the envoys of Lebanese President Lahoud, including Lahoud's son and long-time political operative Pakradouni. He claimed that he had come to an agreement with Lahoud's envoys to drop the legal charges pending against Aoun that were leveled by the pro-Syrian government at the time of Aoun's "war of

liberation" against the Syrians. Aoun said charges of misappropriation of state funds had been dropped in a legal proceeding May 4 and that charges related to his Congressional testimony leading to enactment of the Syrian Accountability Act were scheduled to be dealt with in court on May 5. No matter what the outcome of this proceeding, Aoun said, he would return to Lebanon on May 7 and enjoyed sufficient popular support and credibility to "remain on the political scene despite all these efforts to eliminate me from the game." He stated that he had no fear for his personal safety in returning.

15. (C) Given the corruption and lack of credibility of most of the opposition forces, Aoun said he had to "have allies who perhaps should not be my allies," making clear subsequently that he was referring to Hizballah. Charge stated clearly U.S. policy on Hizballah and warned Aoun not to allow himself to be used by political forces in Lebanon that wanted to see Syria retain a measure of influence in Lebanon's affairs. Aoun said he had no personal political ambitions in returning to Lebanon, either for a seat in Parliament or for the Presidency. He repeated that his objective is to restore the Lebanese democracy and have that achievement stand as his legacy to the Lebanese people. To do so, however, he needs allies and the traditional political elite are not a viable alternative in the eyes of the Lebanese public, which wants real change.

16. (C) Hizballah, by contrast, enjoys "a certain popularity" and is known to be honest and not to have exploited the Lebanese people. For these reasons, Aoun said he could work with Hizballah while encouraging them to give up their weapons to the Lebanese army. The time of imposition of change by force in Lebanon is passed, Aoun asserted. "We must convince people, and put the rifle aside." Hizballah should also know that its "protection against the foreign threat" (a reference to Israel) is not through violence, but through a re-made Lebanon able to speak as a nation and eventually be part of a wide-ranging Middle East peace accord. Moreover, said Aoun, "we don't have a way to compel (Hizballah) militarily" to give up their arms. Bringing Hizballah around will take finesse and patience, qualities Aoun said mark him as an "atypical" Lebanese politician.

17. (C) Reminded that he should not allow disagreement over the election law to become a pretext for delaying the elections, Aoun demurred. He said that a short delay "of perhaps 15 days," would allow Parliament time to adopt a new, more equitable election law that would ultimately strengthen the opposition's chances in the elections. Conduct of the elections under the 2000 election law would further polarize the Lebanese polity and favor pro-Syrian loyalists. "The results will not be good," Aoun asserted. Charge reiterated forcefully the need to maintain momentum by holding elections as scheduled on May 29.

18. (C) Finally, asked about his immediate plans on his return to Beirut May 7, Aoun said he planned first to visit the tomb of the unknown soldier (perhaps playing to his supporters within the Lebanese military), then Hariri's tomb. Aoun is then scheduled to attend a rally in Martyrs Square, where he will give an address. Thereafter, he intends to hold "open house" receiving members of the opposition and loyalists alike, should they wish to come.

Comment

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19. (C) Aoun clearly understood our message and took on board Charge's warnings on the need to maintain opposition unity and not allow his arrival to be exploited by pro-Syrian loyalists. He, nevertheless, is convinced that he knows the Lebanese political scene into which he is about to reinsert himself and has a strategy for consolidating support around himself. His dismissal of the possibility of working with Jumblatt and other Christian and Sunni opposition figures does not auger well for opposition unity, and his willingness to embrace Hizballah is disturbing evidence of the same kind of political opportunism of which he accuses Lebanon's political elite. We leave to Embassy Beirut an assessment of how far Aoun may succeed. Our impression of the man, however, was that while not lacking in courage, he may be overestimating the extent of his appeal to the Lebanese public after 15 years in exile, and (at least in our two-on-two setting) did not appear to possess the kind of energy and charisma that would be needed to command the loyalty of a mass following. End comment.

ROSENBLATT